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ABSTRACT

The teacher who has become dissatisfied with the snapshot-type evaluation offered by most tests is probably ready to begin to use portfolios as assessment tools, but may not know how to go about it. Essentially, a portfolio is a collection of samples of student work that is developed over time, chosen according to specific criteria to represent student progress and achievement, and presented with an introduction, explanation, or assessment of the contents. Portfolios are created from things that students do over time in a subject area. They may be kept in a variety of formats, but should be kept in a way that provides frequent access. The teacher should present the criteria for selection for the portfolio, and the students should select what to include. It is essential that students evaluate their own work if the portfolio is to be effective. Critical thinking comes into the introduction, explanation, or assessment of the contents provided by the student. Once the portfolios have been collected, the teacher must evaluate them, and then, when students have seen their grades, the portfolio can be returned to the student, passed on to the next teacher, or filed in a central place determined by the school. Portfolios can be an effective tool to help students see their academic growth and identify areas where they still need to grow. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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Using Portfolios: How Do You Begin?

A Presentation at the

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Using Portfolios: How Do You Begin?

Introduction

You've probably read about using portfolios as an effective way to assess what your students have learned. Perhaps you're dissatisfied with the snapshot-type evaluation offered by tests and are ready to begin using something that, more like a video, will help both you and your students see how they have grown over time. If you've been thinking about these things, you're probably ready to start using portfolios as an assessment tool in your classroom.

But how do you begin? Examining a definition of *portfolio* might clarify your understanding as well as help you decide how best to use them in your classroom.

The Definition

Essentially, a *portfolio* is a collection of samples of student work developed over time, chosen according to specific criteria to reflect student progress and achievement, and presented with an introduction, explanation, or assessment of the contents. The parts of the definition can be explained like this:

1. *A collection of samples of student work.* Portfolios are created from things that students do over time in a certain subject area. This means that you can start by

doing what you do now--giving tests, assigning papers or seatwork, developing projects that give the students a chance to show what they know. These things may be *formal*--final versions--or *informal*--drafts or notes--but must be things that the students themselves have done. From this accumulation of work, students select items to include in the final portfolio.

You will probably want to start with only one subject area and then add portfolios for other subject areas in subsequent years. Generally, language arts is the easiest, since a variety of student work is available to choose from; some teachers prefer starting with math, to encourage confidence in doing math. Choose whatever you feel most comfortable with.

2. *Developed over time.* The time span could be a marking period, a semester, or a year, but it must provide the students with enough opportunity to produce pieces of work fairly regularly and in a variety broad enough to reflect growth in that particular area. This will give them an ample amount of work from which to choose when the time comes to assemble the portfolio.

At the beginning of the time span--let's say a year--introduce the concept of portfolios to your students. Tell

them that you want to use this new way of evaluating their work so that both you and they can see how much they've learned during the year. Point out that, because it will include some of their work but not all of it, they will be working on their portfolios over the entire year, both in class and on their own. It's a good idea to give them some examples of work that might be included in a portfolio, such as tests, writing, drafts, or projects. If possible, assemble a model portfolio to show them what a final product might look like.

Many teachers find a two-pocket folder ideal for holding the contents of a portfolio; others simply need a paper clip. Depending on the sizes and shapes of work that might be included, a three-ring binder or a large folder with a cover flap and an elastic band might be better. Whatever the choice, it is probably a good idea to have every student use the same type of container. Not only does this make it easier for you to keep track of them, but it also circumscribes what students are able to include. A paper clip won't hold as much as a large folder.

After you have described the portfolio process and purpose to your students, invite their responses. What advantages do they see to including portfolios as part of

their schoolwork? What do they think they would need to do in order to create a good portfolio? What would they tell their parents about this new way of seeing how much they've learned? Make sure that they understand that they will still get tests and grades during the year, and that the portfolio will be something additional that helps them pull together everything they've learned.

You will want to refer to the portfolio frequently during the year so that students can have it in mind as they are working. Particularly if work is not saved in a folder in the classroom, students will need to be reminded to keep all their work, even if they think it's not good, so that they will have it to choose from when they assemble the portfolio. Their perception of the work might change over time, or the work might still be useful as part of the portfolio, even if the perception does not change.

3. *Chosen according to specific criteria to reflect student progress and achievement.* This is the part that makes a portfolio a portfolio. You present the criteria; students choose what to include that fulfills those criteria. Do not ask for only the best work, although the best should be included. What you are looking for is work that reflects the growth of the student in that subject

area, so you need to give a variety of criteria that will help students to display their growth. For example, ask students to include the piece of work they like the best, the one they found most frustrating to do, and the one they worked hardest on. Or ask for the two that show the widest range of their work, the assignment they hated the most, and the one they liked best. You might also ask for samples of work in different areas of the subject. For example, in English you might ask for one set of notes from a group activity, one paper about something they've read as a class (including revisions), one creative piece, one literary journal entry, and one test. In math you might want to see one seatwork paper, one test, one homework paper, and one project. Whatever the case, you set the criteria, and students choose the work that fits.

It is essential that students be able to evaluate their own work if portfolio assessment is to be effective. As part of the ongoing process, teach students how to use criteria in order to evaluate a piece of work. For example, you could list the criteria for an assignment on the blackboard, and then on the overhead projector project a sample paper (perhaps one you've created yourself or one from past years rather than one that a current student

actually wrote) that was written in response to that assignment. Lead the group through a discussion of the extent to which the paper fulfills the criteria. Point out where the paper misses the mark, as well as where it is right on target. Then have students evaluate their own papers and hand in that evaluation along with the assignment, perhaps using a form that you have created. Grade the paper as you normally would do. If you had the students use a form, use the same one yourself. Students will thus be able to compare your evaluation with their own.

Periodically during the year, have the students select the papers they would put in the portfolio at that point, using the criteria you will ask them to use for the final version. You might find it effective to do a fishbowl group, where a group of three or four student volunteers discuss with you the reasons for the selections while the other students look on. Direct the discussion to the reasons for including the papers in the portfolio, rather than your own or the other students' agreement with the selections. After the group has finished, have the whole class discuss what they saw in terms of the process by which portfolio piece selection and discussion took place. Your purpose at this point is not to evaluate the portfolio, but

to show students the process and thus help them select seriously and wisely.

4. *Presented with an introduction, explanation, or assessment of the contents.* This is where critical thinking (analysis, synthesis, or evaluation) comes in. Students preface their portfolio with something that tells you why they chose the pieces that are included and how the pieces fit the criteria. The simplest way to do this is in the form of a letter, since students tend to write more easily in letter style than in a formal paper and are more likely to keep you as the audience in mind as they write. You may instead want an explanation prefacing each piece, or you may give them a form or checksheet to fill out, or you may choose to meet with each student and have him or her talk with you about why they chose each piece. Whatever you choose, remember that in this part the important thing is the student's communication to you, not the form that the communication takes.

Think of ways to keep portfolio assembly from being superficial for the students, putting in any piece at random and then coming up with a justification. Help them to think first, and articulate that thinking afterwards. You might allow them some class time to assemble their portfolios

(generally, short periods of time spaced over several classes tend to produce better work than a long period at once). Or you might devote a class period to having them present their portfolios to one or two of their classmates, then giving them time to revise the portfolio based on their peers' feedback before they give it to you. One enterprising teacher has each of her students bring in a guest on Portfolio Day--a parent or grandparent, an older brother or sister, an adult friend, even another teacher--and students and guests gather in pairs around the room while all portfolios are presented simultaneously, each student to his or her guest. This gives the guest unique insight into what kinds of things are being done in school and what kind of work the student is doing. This also gives the student practice in oral skills and a chance to rethink the contents of the portfolio. You might also ask each guest to write a response which would be included as part of the portfolio.

Another possibility is to have each student take the portfolio home for presentation and have a parent write a response that would come back with the portfolio. This is an excellent and meaningful way to get parents involved with their children's schooling.

Now What?

When you have collected the portfolios, what do you do with them? Portfolios generally receive a grade, based (as with any graded work) on how well the student fulfilled the criteria. Since you usually have seen the papers that comprise the portfolio (with the exception, probably, of notes or drafts), you need pay little attention to them. Your focus will be on the explanation of why each piece was selected and students' evaluation of their own progress in the subject. Grading them with this in mind should not take much more time than grading any set of papers, even though the collection of folders might look formidable. Many teachers who have adopted portfolio assessment have substituted it for one test or assignment, so as not to add to the burden of work, either yours or the students'. Its weight towards the final mark should be appropriate to the amount of work involved, so don't substitute it for something that counts for a small percentage of their final grade.

Once the student has seen your grade, the portfolio can either be returned to the student permanently, passed on to the next teacher, or filed in a central place determined by the school. Some schools have students review their

portfolios every year, selecting one or two representative pieces from each year. The result is that by the time the student completes that level of schooling, he or she has a manageable file that displays growth over the years.

Conclusion

Portfolios can be an effective tool to help students see their academic growth and to identify areas where they still need to grow. However much or little finesse we can bring to the job of assigning, helping to develop, and assessing portfolios, we need to begin to give students this invitation to step back and see how far they've come and where they have yet to go.

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